Some Observations on the Evolution of Modern Standard Punjabi

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One of the most striking features of contemporary South Asia is the degree to which religion on the one hand, and language on the other, have come to determine social, political and cultural identities with ever sharper emphasis. Even now, of course, there is seldom a perfect congruence between these two factors, given the inherent complexity and variety of South Asian societies. Nevertheless, when there is a considerable measure of overlap between religious and linguistic boundaries, the results are liable to escape the full control of central governments, all committed to more or less open pursuit of the centralising ideals of the former imperial regimes. The most obvious current instances of this rule are provided by the civil war in Sri Lanka between Buddhist Sinhalas and Hindu Tamils, the long-running tension in Assam between Assamese-speaking Hindus and Bengali-speaking Muslims, and of course the seemingly insoluble crisis in Punjab, the state brought into being in 1966 as the result of the long Sikh campaign for the creation of a state in which Punjabi would have undisputed official status.

These and similar conflicts involve so many complex and inter-linked factors that they are hardly easier to analyse fully than they have been to resolve satisfactorily. It is, moreover, a striking common feature of the analyses of all these situations and of their historical antecedents in the colonial period that they tend to concentrate primarily upon political, social and economic factors, and only secondarily upon identifiably religious phenomena, with language issues tending to receive only cursory reference. There thus results a rather curious imbalance between the situations on the ground, where issues of religion and language are so prominently articulated, and the emphases of the analytical literature upon other factors presumed to underlie these rallying cries.

This imbalance is to be attributed to several factors. On the one hand, relatively greater prominence has come to be given to social-science-based studies of South Asia in Western universities, as compared with the meagre funding generally available for those based on language and literature. In South

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Asia, too, there is a comparable imbalance, if for rather different reasons, notably the greater pressure upon academics in departments of language and literature to conform to or, still better, to enhance local linguistic chauvinisms in their published work, rather than to analyse them. And finally, it is simply rather difficult to give a meaningful picture of what is going on in one or other South Asian language through the medium of English.

Since the emphasis of the majority of the papers included in this collection conforms to the characteristic pattern outlined above, it has been thought worthwhile to offer some reflections here on the development of modern standard Punjabi (MSP), from the point of view of a linguist. The creation of this literary language as the prime vehicle for Sikh thought and culture is after all one of the most striking achievements of the Sikh community in the twentieth century. It is hoped that the preliminary observations offered here, which in no way aspire to the status of the substantial paper the subject deserves, may serve to stimulate the development of long-overdue research in this branch of Sikh studies, still very much the Cinderella in the descriptive literature available in English.

The crude tripartite division of South Asian history into its ancient, mediaeval and modern periods is open to many sensible objections; but it serves well enough to establish rough parameters within which to outline characteristic changes in the currency of written languages in northern India, historically peopled by largely illiterate speakers of the endless varieties of the closely related group of Indo-Aryan languages.

The need for an unlocalised standard language to record administrative, religious and secular materials was met during the ancient period by the prolonged use of Sanskrit, carefully preserved for some 1500 years in the archaic mould established by Panini. The Muslim conquests resulted in the establishment of Persian in the place of Sanskrit, except in a restricted religious-intellectual sphere. During the Mughal period, many local Indo-Aryan languages began to be used for limited types of writing, typically religious poetry: but only Braj, jointly fostered by the huge spread of the Krishna cult and the casual patronage of the Agra court, was seriously to emerge as a widely used extra-local standard *bhasha*.

The imposition of British colonial rule gradually resulted, by the later nineteenth century, in major changes to this previous pattern of written-language use. English replaced Persian as an imperially imposed standard, but both the more meticulously applied administration of the new rulers and their related encouragement of "vernacular education" demanded the development of selected varieties of Indo-Aryan as standardised written languages. That segment of the role previously played by Persian which was not annexed by English was accorded to Urdu, the Persianised form of the *lingua franca* based on the Khari Boli dialect of Delhi, spoken to the immediate north of Braj; and thus it was that Urdu replaced Persian in the Punjab after the Anglo-Sikh wars of the 1840's. The great spread of Urdu over northern India, though generally

welcome to the Muslim population, came under increasing challenge, however, from its Sanskritised variant, Hindi, promoted by the enthusiasts for this newly-formed medium from Benares and Allahabad in increasingly successful measure against the Urdu norms of Lucknow and Delhi. As the two great religious communities of northern India came into increasing conflict during the later years of the Raj, the Urdu-Hindi controversy—hardly affected by Gandhi's muddled flotation of that elusive middle ground, "Hindustani"—was eventually to be enshrined in the constitutions of the successor states, with Hindi ensconced as the *rashtra-bhasha* (national language) of India, and Urdu pushed back to the west as the *qaumi zaban* (national language) of Pakistan.

Although the outlines of this process are generally familiar, it is important to remember that the evolution of both Urdu and Hindi towards their present status as "national languages" has been accompanied and indeed effected throughout by a whole series of often hotly debated creative decisions by writers of those languages as to standards of correct usage, the account to be taken of the norms of everyday speech *vis-à-vis* those of formal niceties, and the extent to which the rival classical exemplars of Perso-Arabic on the one hand or of Sanskrit on the other should be more or less carefully followed.[1] While the continuing role of English as the carefully fostered language of the *élite* in both India and Pakistan has encouraged committed protagonists of both Hindi and Urdu to push for the excision of obvious anglicisms from correct usage in either language, both have been equally oblivious of the insidious influence of the world's currently dominant international language. This influence appears not simply in the coinage of neologisms at the familiar level of *dur-darshan* for "television" in Hindi or *havai jahaz* for "aeroplane" in Urdu, but in so many apparently unperceived syntactic patterns in everyday usage, e.g., *saval/prashn uthta hai*, "the question arises."

Thus it is that much formal writing in contemporary Urdu or Hindi gives the impression to the objective reader that it is composed in a sort of elaborately Persianised or Sanskritised translationese calqued on the same underlying English patterns, which is only remotely indebted to the classic styles of earlier writers. By the same token, modern formal Urdu and Hindi are often rather remote in syntax and style of expression, as well as in their mutually divergent vocabulary, from the natural patterns of everyday speech. But it is of course precisely this remoteness that has helped to ensure their establishment as standard languages over such a vast speech-area.

The Indo-Aryan languages outside this huge Hindi-Urdu zone, e.g., Bengali, Marathi or Gujarati, underwent a broadly similar process of standardisation during the nineteenth century, as they were transformed to meet the requirements of contemporary expression by the efforts of grammarians and lexicographers continually enticed by the inexhaustible capacity of Sanskrit to

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1. The process is both surveyed in general and examined in detail in C. Shackle and R. Snell, *Hindi and Urdu since 1800: A Common Reader* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies [SOAS], University of London, forthcoming 1988).

produce all manner of neologisms. In each case, the process was aided by the prior existence of substantial quantities of pre-modern literature, usually recorded in a distinctive regional script.

The strong regional identification of these languages did, however, entail a much livelier debate as to the proper adjustment to be reached in written styles between classical standards and colloquial usage than was required in the evolution of Hindi and Urdu as non-local standards of a different type. Immediately related to this issue was the question of the most appropriate choice of dialect upon which the regional standard should be based, a choice inevitably determined as much by the location of major urban centres in the region as by cultural tradition. Obvious examples of both these issues are provided by the historic Bengali differentiation of the everyday *chalit bhasha* style from the Sanskritised *sadhu bhasha*, and by the modern replacement of Calcutta-based norms in favour of those of Dhaka in the contemporary Bengali of Bangladesh.[2]

What makes the evolution of modern Sikh Punjabi so strikingly interesting is that it represents the creation of a standard regional language not on the periphery of the Hindi-Urdu area, but one ensconced in its very heart. The map of contemporary official-language use would vividly show Indian Punjab as a small Punjabi zone between the Urdu territory of Pakistan and Jammu and Kashmir to its west and north, and the vast bloc of Hindi states to the south and east in India.

Since the institutional process by which this intrinsically rather remarkable situation was brought about, culminating in the success of the long Sikh campaign for a "Punjabi Suba," has been amply dealt with elsewhere,[3] the following observations relate to more strictly linguistic and cultural aspects of the language's evolution.

The conscious forging of modern standard Punjabi as the distinctive vehicle for the expression of a revitalised Sikhism was the achievement of a quite small number of outstandingly industrious and talented literary figures associated with the Singh Sabha movement around the turn of the century. The magnitude of their achievement is best appreciated against the background of the essentially quite unpromising linguistic and cultural situation that they faced. The intrinsic contrasts, with Urdu and Hindi on the one hand and with the regional languages of the Bengali type on the other, are worth underlining.

The transfer of the imperial crown from the Mughals to the British had permitted Urdu to enjoy an unbroken pattern of evolution as a literary language, and this firmly established heritage provided a solid linguistic base for the Sanskritising proponents of the new Hindi to work from, to such effect as soon to be able to claim the very different literary idioms used by Kabir, Tulsidas and

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2. Cf. J.V. Boulton, "Bengali," besides the short surveys of other languages presented in C. Shackle, ed., *South Asian Languages: A Handbook* (London: SOAS External Services Division, 1985).

3. Most notably in part 3 of Paul R. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

Surdas as mediaeval Hindi. On any objective criterion, Punjabi is quite as close to the Khari Boli dialect, which underlies both Urdu and Hindi, as Surdas's Braj, and is indeed far closer to it than the eastern Avadhi of the *Ramcharitmanas*.[4]

Then, again as compared with the independent peripheral Indo-Aryan languages, Punjabi lacked the intrinsic advantages not only of recognisably sharp distinction from the norms of Hindi-Urdu grammar and vocabulary, but also the institutional patronage provided by the provincial governments in Calcutta or Bombay. Lahore was, after all, the seat of an administration which conducted its business in English and in Urdu until Partition (as it indeed still remains, although without direct impact on the Sikhs).

Finally, the pre-existent literary heritage in Punjabi was more than usually ambiguous in identifiable linguistic character. Although some form of Punjabi had always been the spoken language of the vast majority of the Sikh community, and although the distinctive Gurmukhi script had always been used to record the vast bulk of its sacred and other literary heritage, the triple Punjabi-Gurmukhi-Sikh equation that has come to be taken for granted by so many Sikhs in India and abroad today hardly existed before the creation of modern standard Punjabi (MSP) in the period around 1900.

The idiom which Guru Nanak, as a poet of utterly superb originality and power, evolved for the matchless expression of his universal message certainly owed much to his native Sheikhupuri speech. But the very requirements of the universality of his teachings, not to speak of then pre-existent norms of literary expression and his own wide travels, involved his drawing upon a far wider range of available linguistic resources. The composite idiom he thus created was expanded by his successors, most notably by the prolific and linguistically versatile Guru Arjan, and was also transferred to prose by the humbler compilers of the *janam-sakhis*. This scriptural language, which I have termed the "sacred language of the Sikhs," is certainly not "Old Punjabi," though many of its elements are drawn from that local source.[5]

Although modernised versions of this composite Punjabi-based sacred language of the Sikhs survived in some post-scriptural Sikh texts, it was Braj and Persian, the great North Indian literary languages of the later Mughal period, that came to dominate Sikh writing after the time of Guru Arjan. Those parts of the Dasam Granth that can plausibly be attributed to the pen of Guru Gobind Singh himself indicate that, while he was equally at home in Persian, his preferred medium was Braj, as it had been his father's. And Braj, written in the Gurmukhi script, was thereafter to be the prevalent medium for the production of

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4. Although the traditional taxonomy of the Indo-Aryan languages effected by Grierson in the classic *Linguistic Survey of India* is open to all sorts of objections, these are hardly to be levelled against his alignment of Punjabi with Western Hindi and assignment of Eastern Hindi to a separate volume.

5. The picture given in my teaching manual, *An Introduction to the Sacred Language of the Sikhs* (London: SOAS, 1983), should be supplemented by reference to the preface of my earlier *A Guru Nanak Glossary* (London: SOAS; and Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1981), and the listings of more specialist treatments of the sacred language of the Sikhs appended thereto.

most later Sikh writings throughout the heroic *gurbilas* period down to the colossally effective final synthesis of pre-modern Sikh tradition composed by Bhai Santokh Singh.

By one of those paradoxes with which the linguistic and cultural history of South Asia so abounds, it was precisely during this period of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the Sikhs were writing in Braj, a now discarded language claimed by Hindu enthusiasts as one of the major "ancestors" of modern Hindi, that Punjabi was being developed as a literary medium for the creation of superb verse by Muslim poets. Drawing extensively upon their Persian heritage, and writing in the Persian script, such masters of the Sufi *kafi* as Bullhe Shah (1680-1758) were joined by such glorious exponents of the narrative *kissa* as Varis Shah, whose *Hir* (1766) is the universally acknowledged masterpiece of Punjabi literature,[6] and the later Hasham Shah (1753-1823). The universal appeal of this literature, generated from within the Muslim community, which has for so long constituted the majority of Punjabi-speakers, is attested to by the number of nineteenth-century manuscripts recording its compositions in Gurmukhi.[7]

Although literary histories and bibliographic listings record the names of many Sikh authors of *kissa*-narratives, they were latecomers to this well-established poetic tradition and are hardly to be resurrected as major contributors to it, except within the context of a careful examination from the linguistic viewpoint of that heterogeneous mass of Punjabi books put out by the publishers of Lahore and lesser centres during the formative years of the period ca. 1870-1914.[8] A necessary prerequisite of this urgently needed examination would be a carefully judged distancing from that prevalent Sikh-Punjabi chauvinist perspective which would view almost anything written in Punjabi as a part of the "Sikh literary heritage," however imperfectly understood.

As the preceding remarks should have served to show, "Punjabi" is one thing and "Sikkhi" is quite another, and the contemporary perception of a virtually complete overlap between the two is quite something else again. The following observations are offered in a deliberately disjointed fashion, in the hope of suggesting that the contemporary Sikh identification with the Punjabi language is quite as much in need of sympathetic but rigorous academic investigation as are rather more generously covered aspects of contemporary Sikhism.

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6. A treatment of the poem, with rather full references to sources in English for the related Muslim literature, has been attempted in my paper "Transitions and Transformations in Varis Shah's *Hir*," to appear in C. Shackle and R. Snell, eds., *Studies in Indian Narrative* (London: Lokamaya, forthcoming).

7. Cf. the summary suggestions made in my "Some Observations on the London Collections of Panjabi and Gurmukhi Manuscripts," *IAVRI Bulletin* 13 (1986), 5-8.

8. E.g., the listings provided in the invaluable specialist bibliography of N.G. Barrier, *The Sikhs and Their Literature: A Guide to Tracts, Books and Periodicals 1849-1919* (New Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1970), as well as the more general, also more casual, coverage of the catalogues of Punjabi holdings in the British (Museum) Library and the India Office Library.

These observations are loosely presented in ascending order of complexity of the phenomena involved. Their collective purpose is less to offer definitive answers than to raise questions which may some day receive an adequate explanation.

At the simplest visual level, the equation between script and separate linguistic identity is one inevitably seized upon by linguistic protagonists in the amazingly multi-alphabetic environment of South Asia. The early proponents of MSP had the Gurmukhi script to hand as an immediate weapon to support their cause. But the contemporary spelling norms of MSP are rather different from those of the sacred language of the Sikhs (although continuing to reflect these in the orthography of many words). When was it, for instance, that the modern conventions of the use of dotted letters to distinguish *sh, z, f* from *s, j, ph* became established? Here the prior influence of Hindi norms seems to be indicated; but on the other hand, the modern convention of indicating the doubled consonants so intrinsic to Punjabi by the use of the symbol *addhik* is hardly to be explained without reference to the convenient *tashdid* of the Perso-Urdu script. But how? And when?

These may seem very drily technical questions, but a much greater range of linguistic issues was involved in the successful creation of MSP. This, after all, had on the one hand to be created in explicit rivalry with the well-established norms of Urdu, the officially established medium of provincial administration and education, and its Hindi variant increasingly employed by the anti-Sikh Arya Samaji polemicists. On the other hand the very imperfectly established norms for the appropriately selected use of one or other of the many spoken dialects of Punjabi provided at best a shifting base from which to confront these major challenges to the carving out of the sort of linguistically-based community identity the Singh Sabha activists and the wider circle of associated Sikh writers so actively pursued.

Three broad stages may be distinguished in the evolution of MSP as an increasingly standardised medium of formal expression, and in the range of uses to which it has been put. Both these aspects, i.e., the linguistic and the literary,[9] naturally correspond in turn to the contemporary evolution of the Sikh community itself and to wider changes in its South Asian social and political environment.

In the formative first stage, the dominance of specifically religious concerns is symbolised by the enormously copious and influential output of Bhai Vir Singh (1872-1957). Linguistically, this stage is characterised by the strong influence of the earlier sacred language of the scriptures which provided the reformers with their spiritual inspiration. The location of Guru Nanak's birth and upbringing had given the sacred language of the Sikhs an equal heritage,

9. Neither aspect is very adequately treated in English, but some possibilities are suggested in my "Problems of Classification in Pakistan Punjab," *Transactions of the Philological Society* (London, 1979), pp. 191-210, or from a quite different perspective in M.P. Kohli, *The Influence of the West on Panjabi Literature* (Ludhiana, 1969).

deriving both from the Majhi dialect of the central Punjab, many of whose features are rather close to Hindi-Urdu norms, and from the so-called "Lahndi" dialects of the western Punjab, which are much more distinctive in linguistic character (e.g., the formation of the future tense as in *jasi* "he will go" or the use of suffixed pronouns as in *akhius* "he said"). This distinctive Lahndi component was sustained in much post-scriptural writing in the sacred language of the Sikhs originating from the non-Jat Sikh communities of the north-west. Drawing upon this heritage, the early creators of MSP preserved this Lahndi colouring in their writings, even if they themselves came from further east, as in the case of Bhai Vir Singh himself, born and bred in Amritsar.

The overlapping second stage may be dated from soon after the First World War and is characterised by the extension of MSP from an overwhelmingly religious emphasis to its use for the creation of a secular literature by Sikh authors. The exposure of most of these writers to Urdu and to English brought a new sophistication and suppleness to the language, and it is from this period that the classics of modern Punjabi date. Many of the most prominent authors of the period themselves came from the western regions, thus encouraging the continuance of the Lahndi influence on dominantly Majhi-based norms. This classic mix is to be seen, in varying degrees, in the elegant essays of Teja Singh (1894-1958), the immensely popular novels of Nanak Singh (b. 1897), the poems of Mohan Singh (b. 1905), or the short stories of Kartar Singh Duggal (b. 1917) and Kulvant Singh Virk (b. 1921).

Although many of these writers, of course, developed their careers in India after 1947, the post-Independence third phase in the evolution of MSP has been dominated by other factors. The wholesale eastward shift of the Sikh population was soon accompanied by a massively increased emphasis on the development and use of MSP as a medium of education and administration, thus extending it far beyond its already established functions as a medium for religious debate and literary expression. With the establishment of the Language Department in Patiala, MSP had for the first time something approaching an official academy, whose influence on the standardisation of the language was soon to be augmented by the proliferation of Punjabi departments in universities and colleges and the recognition of Punjabi as the state language of Punjab in 1966.

This great enhancement of the status of MSP has been accompanied by very noticeable changes in the character of its linguistic elements. The drawing of the Radcliffe line right through central Punjab left the Lahndi areas in Pakistan and split the Majhi area in two. Contemporary standard Punjabi has therefore tended to incorporate a greater colouring from the eastern dialects of Doabi and Malwai, which are intrinsically often closer to Hindi. At the same time, the abrupt termination of the previous official dominance of Urdu on the eastern side of the Partition line has resulted in a rapid loss of awareness of the historically influential Perso-Urdu component in the vocabulary of MSP, which

is naturally still very prominent in the much less altered Punjabi of Pakistan.[10] It is true that some attempt has been made to preserve the distinctiveness of MSP by looking to indigenous sources to express new concepts: thus, while the English "researcher" is expressed in Urdu by the Arabic *muhaqqiq* or in Hindi by the Sanskritic *shodh-karta*, MSP has developed a new sense for the homely Punjabi word *khoji*, originally "tracker." But the intrinsic preference of all Indo-Aryan languages for coining neologisms from classical languages has usually proved too strong to resist, and the most formal registers of MSP are becoming quite as Sanskritised as Hindi.

As is so often the case when the attempt is made to examine the linguistic underpinnings of religious and cultural identities in South Asia, there are therefore a number of apparent paradoxes suggested by the modern evolution of Punjabi. It is, after all, somewhat extraordinary that while so much emphasis should be laid on the separate identity of the Sikhs and on the closeness of their identification with the Punjabi heritage, the formal expression of this position should increasingly be couched in a Sanskritised MSP divorced from the vital idiom of spoken Punjabi,[11] which is far less intelligible to educated Punjabi speakers from Pakistan than it is to the Hindi protagonists so often viewed as the bitterest critics of the Sikhs and their language. But then no one involved with the scholarly investigation of Sikh religion and history in the twentieth century is going to expect simple answers to any serious issue in the field. These preliminary observations will have served their purpose if they suggest that this general rule is quite as true of language as of any other area.

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10. My earliest personal observations of the Punjabi scene in Pakistan are recorded in "Punjabi in Lahore," *Modern Asian Studies* 4:3 (1970), 239-69; my most recent ones, in "Language, Dialect and Local Identity in Northern Pakistan" in W.P. Zingel and S. Lallemant, eds., *Pakistan in Its Fourth Decade* (Hamburg: Deutsches Orient-Institut, 1983), pp. 175-87.

11. Although it is precisely to his exploitation of the vigorous resources of the spoken idiom that Bhindranwale's message has owed so much of its appeal, it is important to remember that this was primarily disseminated by cassettes, not by the printed page, where formalised MSP dominates.